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ABSTRACT

Of all the special fields of inquiry within sociology, the one which most directly and intensively examines inequality is social stratification. The cause, nature, and personal and social consequences of inequality are its proper objects of study. Study of equality is embroiled in a continuing controversy among conservative (functionalist tradition) and radical (dialectical or conflict tradition) theorists. Functionalists take inequality as a necessary "given" in society; radical theorists see inequality as a social illness that requires treatment. America is not committed to the principles of social and economic equality in theory or practice. Equality of opportunity is endorsed in principle but not in practice. Here equity, rather than equality, becomes an issue, and with more equity comes less equality. Women who are entering the labor force in increasing numbers are handicapped by occupational sex typing. Encounters of women in the labor force are a picture of gains and losses--gains with respect to entrance into it and losses in kinds of work and monetary benefits relative to men. Occupational imbalances remain but are gradually diminishing. Vocational education can promote more equality by developing a personal values system for students and avoiding sex typing. (YLB)

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THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Research and Development Series No. 214L

EQUITY FROM THE SOCIOLOGIST'S PERSPECTIVE

By
Jerome J. Salomone

SUMMARY Vocational educators have grappled with equity as a problem and have espoused it as a cause since 1963 when Congress issued both an equity mandate and an equity challenge with the passage of the Vocational Education Act. This paper is one of seventeen reports commissioned by the National Center for Research in Vocational Education to meet the equity challenge through a multidisciplinary approach encompassing three perspectives—academic, vocational education, and special interest group advocacy.

The following paper examines equity as an elusive, theoretical subject predicated on an existential philosophy. Equity issues evolve as a mixture of fact and opinion, and equity is characterized by numerous, imprecise definitions. The paper sets forth a frame of reference for sociology and discusses the sociologist's interest in equity and inequality. The author examines occupational inequality by using data about women to support theoretical points. The paper concludes with a speculation on the role of vocational education in promoting equity in American society.

INTRODUCTION

This paper represents an amalgam of fact and opinion. The arguments I have developed are as problematic as equity itself. There is some optimistic imagery in the paper, but it is more than offset by an abundance of pessimism. There are no clear-cut answers, and certainly no easy ones. Equity is an elusive theoretical subject; it is an even more elusive existential reality. Because of the mixture of fact and opinion, and because of the imprecise dimensions of equity, this work unfolds as a combination position paper and state-of-the-art presentation. It begins by setting forth a frame of reference for sociology; specifies the nature of sociology's interest in inequality and equity; then examines the special case of women in relation to occupational inequality; and finally speculates on the role of vocational education in promoting more equality in American society.

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SOCIOLOGY: A FRAME OF REFERENCE

Robert Bierstedt, a leading humanistic sociologist, observed some years ago that sociology is a discipline with a long history and a short past. True enough, it has been around for a long time in the sense that sociological concerns have been a part of the intellectual currents of the times. Nevertheless, it was little more than a hundred years ago that sociology acquired its name, and less than a century since the first courses were introduced and later instituted as academic programs in North American universities. This discrepancy in the discipline's age is joined by another discrepancy over the proper perspective of the study of sociology.

Sociology—Social Science or Humanities

Some say sociology is a science; that the spirit of positivism, the application of the methods of science to the study of society, is the proper methodological stance of sociology. Others claim just the opposite. For them sociology is, or should be, a humanistic enterprise, bridging the gap between art and science. From this point of view, sociology's aim is to further our understanding of human behavior through the critical assessment of individuals and their institutions. In this way we may come to a more complete realization of the place of humankind in the world. These two traditions in the practice of sociology have been with us from the beginning and continue to represent an important dialogue among sociologists themselves.

Siding with the positivistic or the humanistic branches of sociology has an important bearing on whether empirical facts or interpretative insight are taken to

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JEROME J. SALOMONE is a professor of sociology at the University of New Orleans where he served as departmental chair from 1969 through 1975. He received a bachelor's degree in social science at Southeastern Louisiana University and completed his master's and doctorate in sociology at Louisiana State University. In addition to serving as president of the Mid-South Sociological Association for 1980-81, he is a member of six other professional and fraternal organizations. His lengthy publication list reflects a wide range of interests and research on varied sociological topics. He has been a consultant to numerous state and national agencies and organizations including The National Center for Research in Vocational Education. In 1979, he was nominated for the Alumni Association Award for Excellence in Teaching at the University of New Orleans.

be the essence of the discipline. But this argument does not include disagreement over the proper subject matter of sociology. For both branches, sociology is the study of society and the groups in it, especially the social forces that forge group structures and the changes in them. The unit of analysis in sociology is always the group, not the individual. This distinguishes it from psychology and disposes the sociologist to consider group properties as essential in the analysis of behavior.

The Properties of Groups

One crucial property of groups is that, once formed, they consist of something more than the sum of the individual personalities which comprise them. Groups, therefore, reflect a reality of their own, separate and apart from the persons in them. That reality is inextricably tied to patterns of interaction which emerge when people associate with each other. The regularities of behavior exhibited in group forms are what sociologists call the social structure of groups.

The elements that comprise this social structure are norms, roles, and statuses. Norms are simply behaviorial expectations. When we interact with others we do so within a framework of mutual anticipations of how each expects the other to behave. The norms or expectations give to social conduct a quality of reciprocity, enabling us to predict with some degree of accuracy the reactions of those with whom we are in contact. The norms themselves are not free floating; they are attached to roles we play in the groups in which we participate. Roles, then, are constellations of norms which circumscribe our group behavior. Playing out our roles according to the acceptable normative patterns results in the approving responses of others. Not doing so gives rise to deviance and is likely to meet with disapproval of one kind or another. Several roles may be related in such a way as to comprise a status which is the position we occupy in a group.

Even though norms, roles, and statuses are structural properties, they are simultaneously cultural dimensions of social life. They refer to the ideals of behavior, not to actual conduct. We do not always occupy the positions expected of us or play the roles we are supposed to play, nor do we necessarily conform to normative expectations. What we actually do may vary, sometimes taking us far afield from the cultural requirements applied to us. When ideal behavior and real conduct do not match, there are pressures to bring them in line, either by changing the culture or by changing our behavior.

These observations bring to light yet another property of groups—their ever changing nature. The sources of these changes can be demographic, technological, ideological, or organizational. Indeed, the list of causes of social change is quite large, because social change depends upon the historical and cultural contexts in which it occurs. Whatever inspires or precipitates change, sociologists find in it grist for their mill.

The final property of groups we will consider is their power dimension. People may be considered equal in a spiritual or a political sense, but one of the fundamental facts of life everywhere in the world throughout all time is social inequality. Sociologists have not been able to find a single instance in which the members of a society thought of themselves, and were thought of by others, as social equals. Social distinctions in power, respect, and influence are everpresent features of society. This seems to hold true, even if property and wealth are held in common. There is, then, a hierarchical quality to social life. Sometimes it is formalized, as in the case of bureaucracy; sometimes it is informal, though still quite real, as in the case of social classes in American society. Sociolology prides itself on the longstanding interest it has had in the enduring questions of inequality.

SOCIOLOGY, INEQUALITY, AND EQUITY

Of all the special fields of inquiry within sociology, the one which most directly and intensively examines inequality is known as social stratification. Social stratification owes its existence to the presence of differences in the world of nature, including humankind as a part of that nature. Whether we look at the inanimate or animate divisions of nature, we find ourselves face to face with the overwhelming actuality of variation among things. These variations or differences persist, even among things classified as alike. Homo sapiens may be all of one species, but we surely are not alike biologically, physiologically, or sociologically.

Differences, Inequalities, Social Stratification, and Social Classes

Not all differences play a part in the emergence of socia' stratification. Among humans, some differences are ascribed by the accident of birth, such as blood type,

eye color, sex, ethnicity, and nationality; some differences are achieved through forms of competition, which may or may not be recognized among people, such as educational attainment, marital status, wealth (except inherited wealth), and preferences in life styles. Some of these ascribed and achieved differences do not make a social difference. That is, they are not subjected to social evaluation. They remain unranked characteristics which simply make people different, not unequal. Blood type and preferences in food are examples of such differences.

On the other hand, some characteristics do make a social difference; they are socially evaluated and consequently result in judgments about the social worth of individuals. For example, we rank people socially according to the kind of occupation they have, the kind of neighborhood in which they live, the amount of education they have, and the income they enjoy. This list of socially evaluated differences is quite large. It includes both ascribed and achieved dissimilarities, and it varies from one society to another. Even for the same society, the list changes from one historical era to the next. Differences of this kind are not simply differences; they are inequalities among people. Those of us with greater amounts of the desired qualities are considered more equal or better than those of us with lesser amounts of those same qualities. The more of the desired qualities we have, the more power, respect, influence, and privileges we enjoy; lesser amounts of the desired qualities are associated with less power, respect, and influence, and fewer privileges.

The causes of inequality, the nature of it, and its personal and social consequences are the proper objects of study for the sociologist interested in social stratification. The most popular conceptual framework used by sociologists to study inequality is the analysis of social classes. Within this framework, they study the distribution of values, status, wealth, and power; the formation of elites; differential access to status, wealth, and power; the social and psychological implications of status differentials; the impact of social class on institutional and community arrangements; the personal, interpersonal, institutional, and societal consequences of classes; and the dynamics of change in social class systems (Laumann, Siegal, and Hodge 1970). They also examine what might be called the problems of inequality.

Conservatives and Radicals

The study of inequality finds itself embroiled in a continuing controversy among sociologists. The controversy is a long-standing one even though it has not always commanded the kind of attention it has received in the last thirty years. The modern version of the dispute may be characterized as an argument between conservative and radical theorists. Conservatives owe their intellectual ancestry to Comte, Durkheim, Radcliff-Brown, and Malinowski. These theorists can be classified as functionalists. Radical theorists owe their intellectual allegiance to Hegel and Marx and the dialectical or conflict tradition associated with their ideas in social thought.

Functionalists take inequality as a "given" in society. They see it as natural, inevitable, and most importantly, necessary and beneficial to society at large. The clearest case in favor of the functional necessity of inequality is their appraisal of the need for occupational inequality. They say some jobs are more important to society, involve more training, and require greater talent than others. As a consequence, if these occupations are to attract the most capable people as they must, according to the theory, they must also have attached to them greater rewards in money and respect than more mundane jobs requiring lesser amounts of skill and training. By assigning material, social, and symbolic value to jobs according to their presumed worth, society reaps the rewards of having the best possible arrangement of people and occupational positions. "The system of occupational inequality is thus an unconsciously evolved device by which societies ensure that the more important positions are conscientiously filled by the more qualified persons" (Davis and Moore 1945).

Hardly had the ink dried on these functionalist observations before they came under serious and continuing attack. First of all, it was claimed the height of naivete to believe that some occupations are, in any objective sense, inevitably and always more important than others. After all, the importance of a given kind of employment, indeed any kind of employment, is inextricably tied to the value system of the society, and values are subjective. They are shared perceptions, beliefs, and ideas about what is desirable and worthwhile. As such, values are subject to change with the changing conditions of social and cultural existence.

Secondly, the opponents of functionalism exposed what they claimed was an ideological bias in the functional argument. In it they found a grandiose

rationalization for the perpetuation of existing occupational arrangements. The occupationally privileged should enjoy more rewards for their efforts. They deserve what they have, because they are better at their work than others. The occupationally underprivileged deserve their lot also by virtue of their lesser capabilities, motivation, and skill.

Instead of the theoretical scenario formulated by functionalists which their critics consider as simply conservative rhetoric, another ideologically opposite rhetoric is advocated by radical theorists. They start with a different "given." For them, the world, as it is found, is a world of inequality, though it need not necessarily be that way. These inequalities take many forms—inequalities in property, wealth, income, education, skill, respect, influence, opportunities, life chances, and innumerable others. All these inequalities can be "reduced" to inequalities in power.

Power is associated with every dimension of life in society; nothing in social life escapes it. Once in place, power differentials are used by those with them to ensure the perpetuation of their advantage. Thus the radical approach to stratification does not see people sifted and sorted into appropriate "privileged and underprivileged" positions according to some unseen hand in society. Rather, "the outstanding fact of social inequality is that people are born into family positions of privilege and disprivilege" (Anderson 1971). The existing set of inequalities operates to the advantage of the powerful while it operates against the powerless. Against those without power, inequality limits the discovery of the full range of their talent; distributes to them more than their share of unwholesome self-images; encourages in them hostility, suspicion, and distrust; hinders their social integration; and allocates to them a disproportionately lower set of motivations to participate fully in society (Roach 1969).

The radical interpretation of stratification views social inequality in a very problematic light. It is, therefore, more likely than any other interpretation to come to the conclusion that inequality is a social illness that requires treatment. Something must be done, otherwise the patient will continue to suffer, if not progressively worsen. To this end, they support what I call the politics of change. The treatment they propose emanates from a concern for a greater social awareness of the role of social justice in addressing the facts of inequality. That treatment is more equality (Gans 1968).

THE RELATION OF EQUALITY TO EQUITY

Equality is an ageless philosophical issue. Its analysis in Western thought can be traced to the classical period of Greek civilization where it represented central concerns of Plato and Aristotle. It seems never to have fallen out of vogue in intellectual affairs since then. Yet, its ultimate answer seems to be as far from settled now as it was then. In contemporary America, a crucial distinction must be made between equality and equality of opportunity. It should be apparent that we are not as interested in equality as we are in equality of opportunity.

Equality and Equality of Opportunity

Actually, there are two fundamental dimensions of equality. One has to do with political equalities; the other concerns social and economic equalities. Political equalities refer to those freedoms and rights guaranteed under the Constitution of the United States as well as to extensions of those liberties granted through successive modifications to the Constitution, like the vote and equal treatment before the law. These kinds of equalities have been less freely given by those who controlled them than taken by those who demanded them. The Constitution itself, its several amendments, and the legislation and court decisions having to do with the question of equality have always provoked conflict. Never has the application of any principle of political equality met with approving consensus. But the fact remains, as a statement of national ideals, we are committed to the goals of equality in political life.

We are not committed, however, to the principles of social and economic equality, either in theory or in practice. Quite the contrary, when we hold America out to the world as the land of opportunity, we have in mind a nation that extolls the virtues of social and occupational mobility. It is a place where one can get ahead, not even. Whether we consider wealth, occupation, learning, honor, respect, or status, we believe a person can accumulate as much of it as possible, as long as it is done without abrogating the rights of others or doing harm to them.

Barriers to Equality of Opportunity

Equality of opportunity is another and somewhat more complicated matter. We endorse it in principle, but we fall short of it in practice. The laws of the land may support it or even guarantee it in some instances, but the realities of everyday life seldom reflect it. What might be called the opportunity market is not available to all without regard to race, color, creed, national origins, sex, age, or especially social class. Equality of opportunity is affected by outright interpersonal favoritism, by institutional discrimination, and by differential access to the resources needed to capitalize on available opportunities. Each of these kinds of barriers to equality of opportunity operates somewhat differently according to the type of minority experiencing the underprivilege. Minorities classified by gender, race, or age, for example, are confronted with a different assortment of specific hindrances that interfere with their quest for equality of opportunity. Joining the kinds of barriers to equality of opportunity with the types of minorities results in a combination of nine possibilities. Each one represents a category of potentially missed opportunities.

Even if we could search for opportunities without encountering any barriers whatsoever, there is a further complication. Is it possible for us to begin the search from the same starting point? Some say yes; some disagree. Underlying the position of the proponents is the conviction that we should remove all legal barriers to equal access and that this, once done, will have the domino effect of knocking down social barriers to equal access to jobs, housing, schooling, and so forth. All that need be done in the name of justice is to give everyone an equal chance. Opponents of this position claim there is no such thing as an equal chance without an equal start. Yet, because of our history of discrimination against, benign neglect of, and blatant subordination of minorities, the poor, the powerless, and the uneducated constitute an American underclass who have no way of obtaining an even start with the more advantaged classes in society. Justice cannot be served, according to this argument, unless we atone for our social sins of the past by doing something more than simply removing formal barriers to whatever it is we seek. Affirmative action is required to redress the wrongs of history. This claim itself has its critics who say it is nothing more than reverse discrimination. It represents the perpetuation of an evil in one direction to correct a prior evil in another direction. . . . and the national debate goes on.

Figure 1

BARRIERS TO EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY BY TYPE OF MINORITY STATUS

Types of Minority Status	*Barriers to Equality of Opportunity*		
	Interpersonal Favoritism	*Institutional Discrimination*	*Differential Access to Resources*
Sex			
Race			
Age			

Note: This table is not intended to be comprehensive. It is an heuristic device to be used as a point of departure for further elaboration and discussion. There are certainly other types of minorities, and other categories of barriers to equality of opportunity.

The Problems with Equity

Precisely at this point in the national dialogue, equity becomes an issue. Equity is a matter of fairness and justice, whereas equality is a matter of sameness. Equality refers to the same chance for an opportunity, the same pay for the same work, the same grade for the same performance, the same access to resources as others. Three distinct kinds of equalities are involved: equality of opportunity, equality of treatment, and equality of results (Gans 1968). The egalitarian tradition in America has favored equality of opportunity above the others. Equality of treatment may be attainable in formal, impersonal situations which take place in organizational settings, but its likelihood in more informal circumstances is neither probable nor desirable. Equality of results is not a great concern in America.

Equity has to do with fairness of opportunity, of treatment, and of results. Greater equity does not mean greater equality. Quite the contrary, more equity may mean less equality (Rawls 1971). If equity is defined in terms of motivation, and if rewards are allocated in terms of it, then the deeper and stronger our motivation, the greater our rewards. If equity is defined in terms of performance, and if rewards are allocated in terms of it, the more outstanding the performance, the greater our rewards. If equity is defined in terms of results, and if rewards are allocated to it, the more plentiful the results, the greater our rewards. In each case, inequalities may be magnified rather than reduced. These observations bring to light a major difficulty with the concept of equity. Equity judgments require agreement about the major values of the society (Gans 1968). Our national problem at this time is not that we do not have principles of equity, but that we do not apply them across the board to everyone alike. We apply equity principles within specified categories of people, such as racial, sexual, ethnic, residential, age, educational, and religious categories, to name only a few.

Because the question of equity is tied to a consideration of values, and because values are a subjective part of human experience, it follows that equity itself is a matter of subjective judgment, and judgments of anything social, including equity, are double-edged swords. They include appraisals of others as well as our own appraisals. Thus there is always the possibility of different interpretations of what is just or fair in any given situation.

Still another difficulty surrounds the notion of equity, especially occupational equity. Do definitions of occupational equity respond to changes in the nation's

economy? Is equity thought of in the same or similar terms in economies of growth and economies of decline? Does it matter that America is rapidly moving out of its age of affluence toward an age of relative scarcity (Blumberg 1980)? What happens to the ideals of unlimited upward mobility, to the ambitions the working class have for their children, to the hope that educational attainment will act as a conveyor belt to occupational success, to deferred gratification in the name of greater satisfactions in the future? We are at this very moment turning another corner in American history, one which will fundamentally alter the system of social stratification and the social classes of which it is comprised. What will that do to our understanding of equity, and more crucially, what will our beliefs about equity do to our understanding of those changes?

As long as standards of thought and behavior are relatively well defined, understood, and unchanging, there is not a great deal of agitation over the question of equity, even if there is considerable injustice in the existing social arrangements. But once things begin to change, the appropriateness of the old arrangements gets called into question and equity becomes an issue. In this regard, a little change could be a dangerous thing. Once a few changes manifest themselves, more are expected, and as these changes are accepted by larger and larger circles of people, the expectation for further change increases. New or emerging definitions, however, are seldom, if ever, evenly embraced by all segments of the society, giving birth to debate over the justice or injustice of the old versus the new. In our lifetimes we have experienced many such debates, and they continue to reverberate through the fabric of our society. Social class relations, race relations, and gender-based relations constitute the main arenas for our national concern over what is fair and just, but there are others. As an illustration of this equity debate we will examine the case of women in the world of work.

WOMEN AND OCCUPATIONAL INEQUALITY

Up to now men have dominated the world. This assertion is nearly universal, holding true almost anywhere in the world we look for its exception, or anytime we look for it. This is also true of male dominion over the occupational life of the society. Men have had and currently have the favored occupations that bring to them greater reward and honor; women are restricted to the home, to those kinds of employment that are extensions of the home in the labor force, or they are restricted to employment neglected by men.

In America, as in other societies, as the division of labor assumed a configuration of male privilege, an elaborate ideology was developed in support of that configuration. Indeed, according to the prevailing beliefs of the time, the moral order itself would be seriously undermined, if not completely destroyed, should women desert their natural domestic duties as wives and mothers for outside pursuits. In this way, feminine domestic duties became the cornerstone of a stable society. That stability is under serious attack, or rather we should say, the attack on that stability has been successful. In this century, and especially since the 1940s, women have poured into the labor force. They are here in large numbers, and they are here to stay.

Their Passage into the Labor Force

Their passage into the labor force was by degrees—first as "deviants" who, because of some assumed human failing, were unable to find husbands and because of it were punished by the need to make their own economic way in life. They were to be tolerated as their condition regrettably represented a necessary evil in our midsts. They were to be pitied as well, for they carried with them a double stigma. They were employed single women; spinsters who had to work.

This exaggeration is not altogether unwarranted for the turn of the twentieth century condition in the United States. But it applies only to one part of American womanhood; the other part came under no such cultural circumscriptions. A different set of normative expectations applied to black women who not only were allowed to participate in the labor force, but also were encouraged to do so, though the kind of employment open to them was of the most servile sort. They were primarily domestic servants in the homes of white women whose station in life allowed them the luxury of servants, or they were agricultural field hands.

Later in this century, the flow of women into the labor force was encouraged by social necessity. The American economy was subjected to a critical labor shortage brought about by our involvement in World War II, the only time in our history in which there was a total mobilization of the population. Millions of females were required to fill the jobs vacated by men who went off to war, and to do the vastly increased amount of work generated by it. They were to be temporary feminine replacements playing masculine roles out of patriotic duty. When their men

returned, the women were expected to return to kitchen, hearth, and home. Some did; many did not. As a consequence, the composition of the female labor force changed. Its hetereogeneity intensified. The spinster was joined by the single, but eventually to be married woman, and also by married women themselves.

As is frequently the case, conditions and circumstances in social life may change more rapidly than our beliefs and values about it. This was certainly the case with the employment of married women. America gave in reluctantly. It acquiesced without endorsing the practice; it accepted before it approved. Grudgingly, married women were allowed to work, but they were permitted to do so insofar as their employment minimally interfered with their more important responsibilities as wives and mothers. This meant, for one thing, that they could work once married only until the birth of the first child, then again after the last child was, in the most desirable instance, grown and gone from the home, or in the least desirable instance, ready for school. Furthermore, working wives were supposed to supplement the family's income through employment which did not compete with their husbands'. They were not to challenge his hegemony as the rightful, principal breadwinner and head of the household. His employment was to be the more important, his income the more substantial. Deviation from this desirable pattern, it was expected, would result in domestic conflict for the couple and entirely deleterious consequences for society at large.

Notwithstanding all of our cultural forebodings, the attractions of employment for married women were greater than admonitions to the contrary. Indeed, the attractions were so great they modified, sometimes substantially, the desire for children and for marriage. And where that was not the case, women still entered the labor force, even with young children and even over the complaints of objecting husbands. Gradually, the disparity between our ideas about women working and the facts of feminine employment was reconciled with our altered notions about the place of women in contemporary society. Employment is now an acceptable life option open to women no matter what their marital status. Career intentions combine with marital ambitions in the mind's eye of many women, and furthermore, enough jobs and men of like mind are around for them to realize both goals.

So women have traveled far during the course of this century in their emancipation from the home and their emergence as a permanent feature of the world of work. Although their human right to seek employment is acknowledged, the journey is not yet over. The concern shifts now to the question: What kind of employment must they seek?

Occupational Sex Typing

A straightforward look at the occupational data clearly reveals a disproportionately large percentage of males in certain occupations and a corresponding overrepresentation of females in certain other occupations. When either sex numerically dominates an occupation, and when cultural values support such domination, we have an instance of occupational sex typing. Although sex typing in occupations is found among men and women, it is more characteristic for females. Half of all women workers are employed in only twenty-one occupations, whereas half of all male workers are more widely distributed in over sixty-five occupations (Robie 1973).

There is nothing intrinsically inappropriate about sex typing in occupations. Although it represents neither vice or virtue per se, its consequences may raise some concern. As a result of it, women are too often found in lower paying, less prestigious employment.

There is little or no sense to the argument that we should necessarily strike a sexual balance in every occupation. We do not need, nor should we want, a quota system so as to ensure "the proper" representation of men and women in the occupations which make up the labor force. First of all, it would constitute a problem in our fundamental liberties of freedom of choice of employment in an "open market." Moreover, it would generate an administrative boondoggle of the highest magnitude. Furthermore, there are some differences in ability between men and women on the average. Men, for example, are stronger. Certain kinds of manual labor which depend on sustained strenuous activity would cause problems for the majority of women. Naturally, some women are strong enough, even for the most demanding work, and should they be qualified and the need exist, they should receive the same consideration due anyone else. The number of jobs for which women would not be considered qualified because of their lack of adequate strength are few in number and diminishing. Mechanization has now invaded nearly every bastion of manual labor. With machines women are as good as men.

Though we do not petition for a balanced sexual arrangement, we do seek a better balance than what now prevails. What accounts for the existing sexual imbalances? Why is there such a masculine advantage?

Why the Masculine Advantage

It would be easy for us to argue that the occupational advantages men enjoy are the product of historical circumstances. They were there first, and they refuse to surrender what they consider rightfully theirs. Such an easy answer contains a certain plausibility, but it is rather simplistic. What was it about the early days that gave men their advantage in the first place? Upon closer inspection, you might wonder if gainful employment in those times could be described as an advantage, except for a few. After all, work was then much more intimately connected with survival than it was with social status. It was the difference between having and not having something to eat. Now, in a society of materialistic surpluses, it has become the difference between having and not having prestige. What has happened over the past several hundred years in industrial society is that work itself has been transformed from a necessity without appreciable social advantage, to a necessity with social advantage. Thus the basis for the competition for work has shifted from an earlier time when men and women had no need to compete with one another to the present when they do.

The partriarchalism of Western Christianity, the frequent pregnancies of women, and the great physical effort associated with early industrial labor also contributed to the numerical preponderance of men in the labor force of that time. But that did not keep women and children out of the labor force altogether, as the literature of the period amply demonstrates.

Things are different now. The division of labor is radically transformed. Women are having fewer children, and planning the ones they have. They are, on the average, better educated than before, are able to choose to remain single and live alone, and can plan for independent futures of their own making. This kind of self determination places them in direct competition for employment and for social status with men as never before.

Sexual Imbalances and Inequalities

The picture we wish to paint of the encounters of women in the labor force is a picture of gains and losses. They have made substantial gains with respect to entrance into the labor force, showing remarkable uninterrupted improvement as a percentage of the total labor force from 1900 to 1980. Each decennial census

indicates an increase, from less than 20 percent of all persons employed in 1900, to more than 40 percent in 1980. Over 48 percent of all adult women are currently gainfully employed. These are remarkable figures; they represent a veritable sexual revolution in domestic and occupational institutions. But the shining progress in occupational entry is tarnished by the kinds of work women are doing and the monetary benefits they derive from it relative to men. By now, the comparative disadvantages experienced by women in occupational status and income are well known. Compared with men, women tend to be concentrated in those occupational groups with fewer monetary and symbolic rewards. They tend to be overrepresented in the lower status occupations, and correspondingly underrepresented in the higher status occupations. Furthermore, within particular occupational groups they tend to be employed in the less desirable occupations. For example, the overall favorable impression one might gain from the percentage of female professional and technical workers is mitigated by the fact that within the professions women are concentrated in the lower paying professions of school teacher, social worker, and nurse; they are much less visible among engineers, natural scientists, physicians, and lawyers. Furthermore, women seem to be well represented among sales workers, until we realize that they are primarily in retail sales where salaries are low and commissions either small or nonexistent, whereas men predominate as sales representatives with better salaries and much larger commissions for wholesaling and manufacturing concerns. Even considering retail sales exclusively, men hold the advantage by working in departments such as furniture and appliances where the most expensive items are sold, and where commissions are higher.

The income differential between men and women is a real one. Part of the difference is understandable. If men have the more responsible, higher-skilled jobs, it can be argued they should have higher average salaries than women. The difference in the income gap does not disappear, however, when those things are held constant. When occupational and educational factors are accounted for, and when only men and women who have worked full-time throughout their entire adult life are compared, the median incomes for women are still approximately 25 percent less than the median incomes for males (Eitzen 1980).

A Hint of a Change

Although occupational imbalances remain, they are gradually diminishing, so that the situation for women is improving slowly. Between 1960 and 1970 women

showed gains in three occupational categories that have been traditionally masculine strongholds: professional and technical, up 1.1 percent; craftsmen and foremen, up .4 percent; and transport equipment operatives, up .2 percent. Admittedly, these are small gains, but they are gains. Moreover, the number of women in medical, law, dental, business, and other professional schools is up, signaling the prospects of further improvement. Things are moving in the right direction, then, but are they moving fast enough, and will this trend continue? The search for occupational equity between men and women requires that as a nation we continue to endorse the present direction of occupational changes, and further encourage the wider participation of women in all kinds of jobs. Among the national resources that can be directed toward this end is our system of vocational education.

THE ROLE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN PROMOTING MORE EQUALITY

Vocational education is only one of many institutions that can work toward correcting some of the inequalities in American society. Frankly, legal and political institutions and the mass media are likely to have more of an impact than educational institutions on that kind of social inequality not directly related to economic matters. Regarding the economy itself, developments in the private sector principally, and those in the public sector secondarily, will have a telling effect on the changing shape of inequality in the future. International trade, inflation, energy, the national balance of payments, and the international value of the dollar are critical yet unpredictable considerations which must somehow be fitted into the equation of our economic future.

Vocational Education as a Passive and an Active Agent

Occupational education is at once a passive and an active agent in relation to society. It is responsive to the occupational needs of the economy. It responds to those exogenous forces impinging upon it from the corporate and governmental spheres. By providing trained personnel for those occupational talents in demand at the moment, vocational education is reacting to rather than acting upon the groups it serves. While this can be viewed as a passive response, it is nonetheless a vital

service to profit and nonprofit employers, as well as a substantial contribution to society itself. Even in a passive role, however, vocational institutions can affect the composition of the labor force by attracting to their educational programs the kinds of minority representation that will aid in the reduction of occupational inequalities.

But educational institutions do more than simply teach skills. They shape values, form attitudes, develop opinions, establish convictions, and generally affect our national belief systems. This is true of formal education wherever it is found. Though developing a personal values system may not be taught as formal course work, it is nevertheless learned, shared, and transmitted in vocational education as well as in traditional academic settings. This ideological role of the school is a part of its hidden agenda. Hidden agendas may be invisible, but their effects are no less real. Vocational education can actively aid the cause of more equality through the shape of its hidden agendas. For one thing, it should be organized from the top down with school administrators, program directors, and faculty who are committed to the ideals of fairness and justice in the training of all students. Vocational educators are professionals, and the standards of professionalism must assert themselves over and against prejudice and bias in any of their manifold forms whether they be racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, or whatever.

Sex Typing in Vocational Education Institutions

Beyond a genuine conviction favoring equity, administrators should ensure a better minority balance among their faculties in those program areas where it is needed. For example, the occupational sex typing discussed earlier in the labor force is also apparent among vocational educators. In 1978,

> Women were more likely to be teaching women. Eighty percent of the teachers both in hospital and cosmetology and barber schools and 79 percent in allied health schools were women. Programs offered by these schools are traditionally those in which women predominate. Similarly, schools that offered programs that are male dominated tended to have men as teachers. Men made up more than 93 percent of the teachers in flight schools, 92 percent in technical institutes, 83 percent in trade schools, and 63 percent in vocational-technical schools. (Kay 1979)

What is true of the instructional staff is true as well of administrative and managerial personnel, where sex typing follows predictable lines. Programs with

heavy female enrollments tend to have female superiors; programs with heavy male enrollments tend to have male supervisors (Kay 1979).

A more equitable sexual balance among administrators and faculty would certainly pay dividends in reducing sex typing among students.

TABLE 1

ENROLLMENTS OF MEN AND WOMEN STUDENTS, BY PROGRAM, 1978

			Change From 1974	
Program	*Men*	*Women*	*% Male Change*	*% Female Change*
Home Economics	29.6	70.4	+14.6	-14.6
Health	13.4	86.6	+ 3.1	- 3.1
Business/Office	27.8	72.2	+ 5.1	- 5.1
Marketing/Distribution	44.3	55.7	-15.5	-15.5
Trades/Industry	63.5	36.5	- 2.9	+ 2.9
Agribusiness	61.7	38.3	-18.0	+18.0
Technical	85.9	14.1	- 5.9	+ 5.9

Source: Kay, *Enrollments and Programs in Noncollegiate Postsecondary Schools,* p. 8.

Table I indicates the extent to which sex typing among students characterizes the several program areas in vocational education. While sex typing is apparent, the most important and most encouraging observation to be made is the fact that between 1974 and 1978 sex typing declined. "Men and women made inroads into each other's traditional occupational training fields." Furthermore, "An implication of these trends may be that barriers to entering a sex-dominated program are gradually lessening for both men and women" (Kay 1979). As pleasing as these findings are to our sense of equity, we have cause to wonder if conditions might not change directions and worsen in the 1980s. Some warning signals have been seen already.

Warning Signals and Constraints on Vocational Education

The 1970s represented a pivotal decade in America. The seventies were quiet compared to the turbulent sixties when civil rights, student protests, Vietnam, the generation gap, the sexual revolution, and urban riots commanded our national attention. Yet the 1970s quietly brought with them changes that promise to be even more far reaching than those of the previous decade. The transformations in the sixties were essentially social changes which had economic side effects. Those of the seventies were primarily economic and they are now precipitating social side effects. The fall of the dollar's value abroad, the deteriorating United States trade position, the decline of the American steel industry, the crippling of the automobile industry, the overseas capture of electronics, the dismal performance of housing, and the increase in American-based multinationals are dramatic signs of American economic decline. International competitors are leapfrogging us by installing in their countries technologies made in the United States. They are bypassing the long years and great expense in research and development needed to develop innovative technologies. At the same time, the United States is acquiring some of the characteristics of an underdeveloped country.

> One signal characteristic of underdevelopment is the lack of a sound industrial infrastructure, that combination of electrical power, communications facilities, roads, and railroads that are the necessary underpinnings of any industrial society. Yet with the disintegration of urban centers in America many inner cities are beginning to lose hold of their industrial infrastructure and are consequently beginning to assume the contours of underdevelopment (Blumberg 1980).

How can this assessment of the crisis of American capitalism be taken seriously? Is it not true our living standards and our levels of living are generally holding steady or improving? And are we not adding more than a million jobs each year to the occupational structure? The answer to both questions is a qualified yes. Our living standards and our levels of living remain high because per capita income is increasing about as fast as is the cost of living. But the rise in per capita income is the consequence of the reduction in the size of the household, which in turn is dependent on an increase in the number of individuals remaining single and on the dramatic decline in the birth rate. Within households, per capita income is going up because of multiple incomes—either double-dipping by one spouse or employment by both of them. This in turn creates the need for more jobs to meet the demand, and these jobs are being created, but what kind of jobs are they? They are paperwork jobs in America's bureaucracies; they are in administrative and social services, not in manufacturing or production. There are indications that the public sector has reached its upper limits. Proposition 13, passed in California in 1979, is symptomatic of things to come, and the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency is the amplification of that symptom. The public sector is not very likely to be able to continue to absorb the large number of people who seek employment. The tax revolt in America is putting an end to that. In the private sector the prognosis appears no more promising.

Should these pessimistic predictions come to pass, as I think they will, it means one thing for sure, stiffer competition in a constricting job market. As this happens we find outselves with a rather large army of college graduates who are pouring out of our colleges and universities in unprecedented numbers looking for professional careers which, with few exceptions, are simply not going to be there. This will place college students and vocational education students in direct competition with each other as never before. In the fields of health, business and office education, marketing and distribution, and many technical fields, college graduates will be employed instead of students with vocational education backgrounds. Vocational education students with training in trade and industrial programs are likely to be least affected by this increase in collegiate competition. As this scenario unfolds, it will be increasingly difficult to maintain an energetic concern for equity in vocational education. The concern for equity will shift to the competition between vocational education and college-based learning. This struggle will not only be an intereducational one, it will be an interclass struggle since vocational education, by and large, serves the working class, and collegiate institutions, for the most part, serve the middle class.

Should this pessimistic appraisal be accurate, women, blacks, and other minorities will be even more hard pressed than they were in the 1970s, for they will tend to lose out more often than not, as employers have larger pools of white middle-class male applicants from which to choose. The middle class will shrink and class lines will become more rigid. The ambition to get ahead as rapidly as possible will be replaced by the hope to hold on or fall behind more slowly than those around us.

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Before vocational educators can adequately meet the special needs of special groups, they must be committed to a philosophy of equitable education. The issue of equity in education has received a great deal of attention over the last ten years from the legislative, judicial, and academic sectors. As a result of this attention, research and analysis have shown that the term "equity" has a different connotation for nearly everyone who has attempted to define and apply it to educational programs. In addition, a host of related terms such as equality, disparity, and discrimination are a part of the vocational educator's daily vocabulary.

In an attempt to help vocational educators to articulate a definition of equity, the National Center for Research in Vocational Education has commissioned seventeen papers on equity from three broad perspectives—academic, vocational, and special needs. The authors in each of the three groups provide their own perceptions of and experiences with equity in education to bring vocational educators to a better understanding of this complex but timely issue.

The National Center is indebted to these seventeen authors for their contribution to furthering research on equity in vocational education.

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